1. Introduction

In recent years, place branding has become a core practice in strategies of local and regional development. In politics as well as in urban and regional sciences, it is widely assumed that a positive image is important for economic development at local and regional levels. A positive image is believed to make citizens more attached and to increase the prospects to entice investors, new companies, and a skilled workforce to a region (Markussen 1996; Kotler 2002; Anholt 2006; Gertner 2007; Gilmore 2002). Local and regional representatives in most parts of the western world are thus concerned with promoting their local or regional space, with ‘putting it on the map’ and with creating a positive and distinct image for it (see Syssner 2006). Alongside with the increasing political interest in place branding, a rich array of academic studies and popular hand books have been devoted the issue. With this, academic as well as strategic knowledge about the branding of places has grown considerably (Gertner 2007; Kotler, Jatusripitak and Maesincee 1997; Kotler, Haider, Rein 1993; Olins 2002).

This paper is part of this increased interest in place branding, but positions itself against previous research in two ways. First, it argues that contemporary research on place branding fails to fully acknowledge the power dimension attached to this field. Far too often, place branding research aims to find ‘best practices’ or examples of how problem areas most efficiently could be laden with new values and attached with new and positive connotations. And far too often, those who wish to pursue critical social scientific research seems to dismiss the entire field of place branding as a superficial and a-political one (reference to Anholt). Here, I aim to address the politics of place branding against the background of theories regarding meta-governance and of theories of governance by visions. The main argument is that place branding is about the governing through visions, and that place branding therefore needs to be approached as an important dimension of new forms of urban or regional governance. As visions are fundamental in processes of place branding, the paper will strive particularly to provide a theoretical framework for an analysis of those visions, norms and values as that are forwarded in processes of place branding.

Second, the paper argues that there is a need for a more informed discussion on how place branding contributes to shaping, reshaping and consolidating spatial imageries.
Indeed, place branding has increasingly come to be regarded a place-creating and place-altering practice. Several scholars have emphasized that efforts to communicate a location contribute to shaping and reshaping both the location itself and the ways in which it is conceptualized by external and internal actors (for an overview Syssner 2009). Still, much of the discussions about place-creating practices have addressed the issue of how the image of the branded place itself is conceptualized. This paper seeks to challenge this stance and, instead, ask how wider spatial imageries are set in motion through place branding practices.

Taken together, this paper seeks to develop a theoretical framework that allows me to confront place branding as a political process, through which political visions, norms and values as well as spatial imageries are established. This framework is then to be applied in a comparative study of place branding processes in three municipalities. By way of conclusion, I will argue that more attention needs to be shown those spatio-political frames of reference that are fundamental to the branding of places.

2. Place Branding: a Values & Spaces Analytical Framework

One of the main arguments in this article is that contemporary processes of place branding ought to be understood from a political perspective. The branding of places holds a central position in the urban and regional governance of our days, and we can learn more about this endeavour if we study it against the background of theories of meta-governance and of theories of governance by visions. Another main argument of this article is that studies on place-branding ought to pay more attention to the ways in which place branding contributes to shaping, reshaping and consolidating spatial imageries. In this respect, the article will attend mainly to the question of how representations of places beyond the place (Massey xxxx) helps to shape the ways in which a local place is communicated to actors’ external and internal to the very place.

With this, the article aims to provide a theoretical framework for an analysis of those visions, norms and values as that are forwarded in processes of place branding. It also strives to provide a framework for studying those wider spatial imageries that are set in motion through place branding practices. In this, the paper seeks to suggest concrete ways of how abstract goods such as ‘visions’ and ‘spatial imageries’ can be empirically investigated. Taken together, however, the paper seeks to develop a conceptual framework that allows us to study those spatio-political frames of reference or those ‘value spaces’ (värderum) that are construed and forwarded in processes of place branding. This framework is then applied in a comparative study of place branding processes in three municipalities. By way of conclusion, it is argued that the conceptual framework developed here, can be applied in many other empirical contexts, where the connection between space and values proves to be of importance.

- A full paper can be requested from the author via e-mail from August 15th -